

Records/Alan Rich

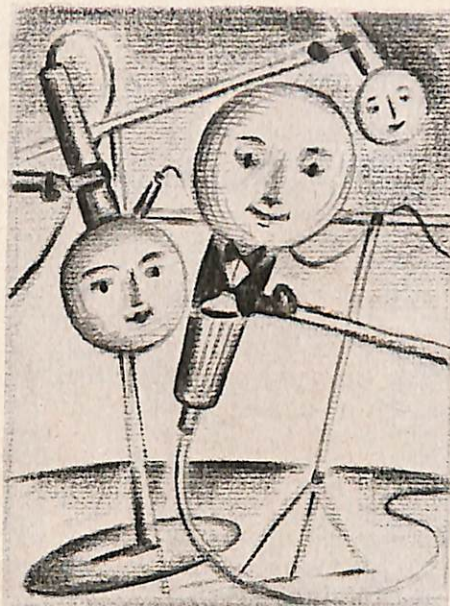
PRESENCE INDICATIVE

“...De Larrocha’s *Goyescas* is a wonderful record in many ways, most of all because the pianist makes her own presence felt...”

No matter how valiantly the engineers may strive to refine the process of recording sound on tape or disc, no matter how thin the consumer may stretch his bankroll to fill his living room with knobs, transistors, and loudspeakers, the gap between the recorded performance and the live event can never be bridged. You can invoke every tired cliché in the book about the mystic communion between live performer and live audience, but the process does, indeed, take place.

I love records; my home is full of the damned things. But listening to music on electronic equipment breeds one brand of satisfaction, and listening in an auditorium breeds something entirely different. We have to be impressed by the fact that sound engineers have developed their skills to the point where we can almost discern, from hearing a good record on good equipment, what color necktie the performer is wearing. But the driving force behind that performer—mystical, spiritual, call it what you will—is an essence that lies beyond the capture by microphone, or by TV camera. From a photograph of Lisa Gherardini del Giocondo we could learn a certain number of facts about the lady; but from our personal interaction with Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* we learn even more. That analogy, imperfect though it be, defines the differences between the embalmed, immobilized performance on records and the same performance live. The insane quest for mechanical perfection, whereby a recorded performance often becomes a spliced-together collage of correctly played short passages from several sessions, further widens the gap between the real and the electronic.

Yet there are certain musicians who, beyond the techniques they have acquired to serve their needs on the stage, have also been successful in mastering the further techniques of playing to a microphone in the impersonal confines of a recording session: not only *to* the microphone, but *through* that microphone to a live if unseen audience. They have developed the technique, in other words, of recording themselves along with their per-



formances. The number of truly “phonogenic” performers is, however, rather small. You might think that singers, because their art is produced without external mechanisms, ought to be able to project all of themselves onto a record, yet few do. The great Rosa Ponselle said somewhere—I think it was on an anniversary record that came out a few years ago—that she never was able to record an aria or song the way she sang it in person. This, I’m sure, wasn’t merely a matter of the archaic recording techniques in Ponselle’s day, but more a matter of an inability to work when removed from that process of live communion; I am sure that she spoke for thousands of her colleagues—singers, conductors, and instrumentalists alike.

The excitement in listening to records (as opposed merely to *hearing* records while doing something else) is genuine: It brings us face to face with the world of musical detail—the music’s design, the artist’s technique, his ability to produce splendid sounds. The genuinely phonogenic artists, however, are a breed apart. They are not necessarily the greatest masters of their respective arts, but they are the few people who manage to make their own presence felt in the home listening

room along with their music. This has nothing to do with “fidelity” of recording. Toscanini, for example, worked most of the time under wretched acoustical conditions, yet the personality he impressed onto his performances is unmistakable on records; you could never mistake a Toscanini performance for anyone else’s, the way you could with almost every conductor working today. Others in that select circle—for me, at any rate—include Elisabeth Schumann and Elly Ameling among singers; Segovia, Rampal, Szigeti in his prime, “Fats” Waller, Solomon, and Alicia de Larrocha among instrumentalists.

This rambling preface is, in fact, by way of leading up to de Larrocha’s new record (London CS 7009), a complete performance of Enrique Granados’s set of six long piano pieces called *Goyescas*. It is a wonderful record in every respect, but most of all because of that indescribable quality that I’ve been struggling to describe, the sense of the performer’s presence. The music, of course, has a presence of its own, these elegant, flawlessly fashioned evocations of Goya’s Spain, their mingling of pathos and grace managed with a consummate skill that needs to be thought of as “classic” in the best sense. There is a peculiarity in the musical art of Spain; you sense it also, for that matter, in that country’s paintings. It is a celebration of the individual over the group, of the miniature over the massive expression. Manuel de Falla may have been a more adventurous composer, but Granados—in the small output of his foreshortened life—created a kind of music in which the miniature becomes a very grand, very broad expressive unit. The joining of his musical instincts to the visual sense of Goya was one of those perfect marriages that rarely happens in the arts.

If you’ve been lucky enough to meet de Larrocha, you immediately come to realize how close she is in spirit to Granados’s own musical ideas. I don’t mean, merely, that she is a very small lady, with tiny hands that, you first think, oughtn’t to be brought anywhere near a piano. It is more a matter of a love she has acquired for the elegant